

“Third round” of the presidential election on 4th December in Austria

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Analysis

On 12th September, the Austrian Minister of the Interior, Wolfgang Sobotka (People's Party (ÖVP)), announced that the «third round of the presidential election, initially planned for 2nd October would be postponed until 4th December due to problems that had emerged regarding some envelopes (the latter did not close properly and a badly sealed envelope invalidates the vote) the distribution of which to the electorate voting by post had started. The latter group represented 16.7% of the electorate in the second round (invalidated) of the presidential election on 22nd May.

On 22nd May Alexander Van der Bellen (The Greens, DG) emerged victorious from the second round with 30, 863 votes more than his rival Norbert Hofer (Liberal Party, FPÖ) who challenged the results.

On 1st July, after having interviewed 90 people over two weeks the Constitutional Court invalidated the 2nd round of the presidential election, indicating that although there was no evidence of electoral fraud, irregularities had however marred the election. These were witnessed in 94 of the 117 electoral constituencies, on 77, 926 postal voting slips which were not sorted within the legal timeframes and in 14 constituencies without the presence of certified observers, a common practice that had always been tolerated. The counting of these slips was indeed allowed one day after the election only, on 23rd May starting at 9am. Gerhart Holzinger, the Court's president declared that the publication of the postal voting results on the same day as the election went against the principle of freedom. «It cannot be ruled out that the communication of the results to certain people might influence the behaviour of some of the electorate. And this is all the more so since present communication

technologies make a wide dissemination of information across the entire country possible,» he stressed. The Constitutional Court therefore had no other choice but to annul the second round of the presidential election and ask for the organisation of a new round.

After the second round the government led by Christian Kern (SPÖ) that comprises the Social Democratic Party and the People's Party (ÖVP), spoke in support of a reform that would make the counting of postal votes possible on the same day as the election.

The mandate of Heinz Fischer, the outgoing head of State came to an end on 8th July last. His seat is occupied at present by three people who are maintaining the interim: Doris Bures (SPÖ), the leader of the National Council, the lower chamber in the Austrian Parliament and her two deputies, Karlheinz Kopf (ÖVP) and Norbert Hofer!

From the second round of the presidential election on 22nd May last there emerged a divided country: on the one hand the most qualified Austrians, urban dwellers in the country's south east mostly voted for Alexander Van der Bellen and on the other, the electorate with the least qualifications, living in rural areas in the country's north west, mainly voted for Norbert Hofer.

Although immigration was the electoral campaign's focal point last spring, the European Union might be the central theme this time round. The Liberal Party (FPÖ) is eurosceptic and supports the organisation of a referendum on Austria's membership of the EU if Turkey were to join. "The FPÖ has been flirting with the idea of Austria leaving the Union and the euro for years," stresses Alexander Van der Bellen.

Presidential election in Austria
24th April , 22nd May and 4th December

In an interview with the newspaper Österreich on 13th August last, Norbert Hofer, who voted against Austria's membership of the EU in 1994, said that he would turn to a referendum if the EU adopted the wrong path, i.e. towards greater centralisation and if Vienna was deprived of its powers to the benefit of civil servants in Brussels. Last month he said to the daily Die Presse: "I do not want Austria to leave the EU because that would be a mistake". The populist candidate knows the majority of Austrians are against their country copying the UK and leaving the EU. According to a poll published on 8th July last in the newspaper Österreich, 52% are against this, 30% support the idea and 18% are undecided. Six Austrians in ten (60%) say they are also against the organisation of a referendum on the issue.

Whilst at the beginning of July all polls forecast a win for Norbert Hofer, the most recent poll by Hajek, published

on 2nd September, forecasts a two point lead for the FPÖ candidate ahead of Alexander van der Bellen (The Greens, DG) (51%-49%). Just one month before the third round of voting the two men are running neck and neck and the outcome of the election remains very uncertain.

According to Peter Filzmaier, Professor of Political Science at the University of the Danube in Kems and at the University of Graz turnout will decide the election's outcome. "A higher than average turnout will serve rather more the interests of the FPÖ candidate, Norbert Hofer, since this will mean that he has succeeded in convincing his supporters to turnout to vote whilst they tend to deem the post of president of the Republic not be of much use," he indicated. We might recall that in December 2009 the FPÖ's leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, mentioned the possibility of the abolition of the presidential office in Austria.

Reminder of the presidential election results on 24th April and 22nd May 2016 in Austria

Turnout: 68.5% (1st round) and 72.7% (2nd round)

Candidates	No. of votes won (1st round)	% of votes won (1st round)	No. of votes won (2nd round)	% of votes won (2nd round)
Norbert Hofer (Liberal Party, FPÖ)	1, 499, 971	35.10	2, 220, 654	50.30
Alexander Van der Bellen (The Greens, DG)	913 218	21.30	2, 251, 517	49.70
Irmgard Griss (independent)	810 641	18,90		
Rudolf Hundstorfer (Social Democratic Party, SPÖ)	482 790	11.30		
Andreas Khol (People's Party, ÖVP)	475,767	11.10		
Richard Lugner (independent)	96 783	2.30		

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